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TOWARD A THEORETICAL UNDERSTANDING OF TELECOMMUNICATION POLICY IN THE THIRD WORLD*

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Introduction

The communication field's historical preoccupation with mass communication and persuasion is being replaced by a focus on all technologically mediated communication processes, be they point-to-multipoint (i.e., mass communication) or point-to-point (i.e., telecommunication). Pioneers such as Harold Adams Innis (1972), Dallas Smythe (1960), and Edwin Parker (1973) within the academic sphere and the dramatic rise in the politico-economic importance of information-communication technologies played a key role in this transition.

In a related development, the field has also begun to bridge the artificial divide between domestic and international communication research. Latin American researchers who pioneered the NWICO-related research have played a leading role in this transition too, exemplified by the keynote presentation of Oswaldo Capriles (1982) at the X11th Congress and Conference of the IAMCR in Caracas. These researchers were probably influenced by the critique and development of dependency theory by Cardoso and his colleagues (e.g., Cardoso & Faletto (1972), an overview of which is excellently presented in Palma (1978). Again, the erosion of the boundary between national and international communication in the "real world" (Garnham, 1985) played a key role. These developments within the communication field were preceded and paralleled by significant streams of work in the Western literature on international relations (e.g., Cox 1981; 1987) and political sociology (e.g., Evans, Rueschmeyer & Skocpol, 1985; Kazancigil, 1986).

The sub-area of telecommunication policy has burgeoned in the past two decades, within the field of communication as well as outside, again driven by factors external to the academic sphere. However, thoughtful observers have decried the excessively de-

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scriptive and atheoretical nature of this literature (Mosco, 1988; Rowland, 1986). This criticism, directed at research on telecommunication policy in the developed market economies, is even more to the point in relation to its neglected poor cousin, research on telecommunication policy in the Third World. Exceptions such as Barrera (1990), Melody (1985), and Sussman (1984) prove the general point that little is known about the "why?" of Third World telecommunication policy. This paper advances the inquiry on these "why" questions by reexamining the role of the state in telecommunication policy.

The Problem

Communication scholars, most of them schooled in the mass communication tradition, are confronted with subject matter that no longer neatly fits into familiar categories. Those studying communication and development find themselves dealing with telephones instead of broadcasting and opinion leaders. Those studying international communication drift into the study of direct broadcasting satellites (which fit the old point-to-multipoint model) and then find themselves looking at earth station size and location decisions, general satellite economics and the predominant telephonic uses of satellites. The even more adventurous find themselves grappling with the part played by telecommunication in industrial location decisions, telecommunication industry structure, trade in services, privacy and other topics far from the foci of the traditional communication inquiry. Faced with the unfamiliar, communication scholars do what most explorers do: they describe the unfamiliar in dispatches to the home country and attempt to make sense by imposing conceptual schemes on the "facts".

Given enough time, they will, as most explorers do, figure out that their imported conceptual schemes are inappropriate. They may even understand that other conceptual schemes developed by natives or earlier explorers from other lands are better. They may even decide to go native, giving up links with the home country, or engage in reverse exploration, returning with new conceptual schemes. Not having the luxury of time, we cannot let events take their course. We must, instead, consciously attempt to learn from others who have preceded us and to apply and develop appropriate theories. This paper seeks to contribute to that task. Before proceeding to the explicitly theoretical discussion, I will outline some examples from contemporary work in telecommunication policy to highlight the call for greater attention to theory.

Examples. The first example is the theme of information-rich/information-poor used to organize the special issue of the Journal of Communication (U.S.) in 1989. The theme of information-rich/information-poor is quite pervasive in the field.

The use of the information-rich/information-poor theme for organizing research on new information-communication technologies indicates theoretical poverty. It is a very simple idea that anybody (even referees in journals and grant-giving agencies) can understand and has certain qualities that will keep the radical critics quiet and yet not aggravate or excite the conservative powers that be. After all, who could be against bettering the lot of the information-poor? I would be the last to deny its rhetorical value in the policy discourse. My concern is the inadequate attention paid to the deeper, theoretical underpinnings of this concept and its use as a surrogate for theory.

Let us take the example of how distribution of information for use by scientific and technological researchers is affected by technological change. It is very easy to document how patterns of access have changed as a result of technological change (Samarajiva,1989). The research findings may read as follows: "X" number of print

journals were received in the libraries of such and such Third World country and were accessible free-of-change to "Y" number of library users; with the replacement of print journals by online services or CD-ROM, the number of print journals decreased to "x" and the number of CD-ROMs did not make up for the difference and/or the new online services were not provided free of charge leading to a drop in the number of users from "Y" to "y"; therefore, the new technologies have increased the information gap. Or we could have a researcher of a different ideological persuasion arguing from the same facts that this is merely the early part of the diffusion process and that matters will be put right by the passing of time. There is little more than a moral principle being debated here: more information, more access is better; how much does a particular fact pattern deviate from the ideal of access to the maximum amount of information by all?

What are the questions that should be asked? What are the power relations embodied in the communication relation? Is more, cheaper information better, or does it hinder the self-expression of the receiving party? How do international scientific communication flows impact on national scientific structures? How do control and design affect the informational content? Why was the earlier system of scientific communication organized in that particular way and why is it being changed? What are the determinants of the new system? Why do some Third World actors (states, scientific establishments) respond in ways different to others? What generalizations are possible?

The other example is research on Third World telecommunication investment policy. In many cases, the studies do not explain how the policy process works but merely advocate more investment. In other cases, we have the documentation of telecommunication investment policies and actions coupled with discussions of how they deviate from this or that norm. The norm may be self-sufficiency or development of indigenous high tech capabilities. Barring foreign equipment may be praised in this case. If the norm is achievement of the highest levels of technological sophistication or the freest flow of information, the same facts may lead to condemnation. The contrast between the writings of Brundenius & Goransson (1985) and Bruce, Cunard & Director (1988) exemplify the application of different norms to the issue of indigenous manufacture of telecommunication hardware.

What questions should be asked? How are telecommunication investment policy decisions actually taken? What are the forces that determine that telecommunication is given priority in country A and not in country B? What are the connections between telecommunication policy and trade, industrial, or security policy? What is the relation between telecommunication investment patterns and a country's political incentive structures? Is it that some states can invest in services such as telecommunication that may primarily serve business interests and/or productive purposes while others are constrained from making investments that cannot be presented as directly benefitting consumptive activities? How can the consistent divergence between the rationales publicly presented for telecommunication investments (education, health, etc.) and actual uses of telecommunication systems be explained? What is the relation between telecommunication and the state? Does the present or proposed telecommunication system serve to extend the state's power? If not, what purposes does it serve?

A Possible Solution

The central theoretical problem of telecommunication policy, Third World or otherwise, is the problem of the state. Is the state an instrument of class rule or is it an autonomous

actor? If it is an instrument of class rule, is it possible to discern a consistent pattern in state action? If it is an autonomous actor, what are the bounds of its relative autonomy? Is the state purely an arena for struggle by contending interests, and if so, is it skewed to one party or the other? Or is it both a player and the arena? If these questions can be satisfactorily answered, one may be able to parsimoniously explain specific telecommunication policy phenomena and draw generalizations.

The above discussion assumes the nation-state to be a more or less self-contained unit of analysis. This assumption must be relaxed in the case of Third World countries where external forces play a significant role, especially in technology-based areas such as telecommunication. It is of little relevance even in countries such as the United States where transnational actors have assumed larger roles. The questions that must be addressed in this connection have to do with the role of the state at the interface of domestic and external forces.

In the interests of time I will bypass the customary overview and critique of theories of the state and international relations and directly discuss the theoretical work that appears to hold the greatest promise. This is the application of the Gramscian concepts of hegemony and coercion in an integrated fashion to the three levels of international relations, state, and industry by Cox (1987) and others (e.g., Gill & Law 1989). Since Cox, et al. do not explicate Gramscian concepts in relation to telecommunication policy as such, I will first provide a brief overview, explicate Cox's theoretical insights, and then discuss their applications to Third World telecommunication policy.

Gramsci (1957; 1971; 1977; 1978) developed his theory within a Marxist framework in that he accepted polar classes, capital and proletariat, and their determining role in social transformation. However, he does not accept the thesis that all other classes would inexorably atrophy and their constituents end up in the polar classes. He recognizes the importance of classes other than the polar classes in maintaining or destroying the dominance of the ruling class. The ruling class has to continually work to keep the intermediary classes on its side and indeed win the consent of at least a part of the opposing class. The state is utilized by the ruling class for two purposes. The first is to articulate the interests of the ruling class in universal terms and thereby win the consent of the intermediary classes as well as all or parts of the proletariat. This is hegemony. The second is to exercise force if and when voluntary consent is withdrawn by the ruled classes. This is coercion. When the state is strong and the ruling class is well in control, the coercive face of the state becomes more or less invisible. It appears only when the state is weak. The proletariat can capture power only by painstakingly building a counter-hegemony (supplemented as necessary by a coercive capability). Counter-hegemony can be built outside the state as well as within it.

Drawing a military analogy Gramsci describes this as a war of position (i.e., trench warfare) where progress had to be made slowly and painstakingly, as opposed to a war of movement (i.e., climatic engagements between mobile armies that would be decided in hours if not minutes). The state is allowed considerable autonomy by Gramsci. There is recognition of the part played by certain types of intellectuals in the state machinery and the effect of their class backgrounds. Even more importantly, the possibility of a state that would stand outside and above the ruling class is recognized in his discussion of Caeserism (a deadlock between the polar classes giving rise to a "man of destiny" who produces order by freezing the conflict).

The concept of historic bloc is central to Gramscian theory. A historic bloc is made up of antagonistic classes (e.g., land owners and peasants) united in relation to some

other class or bloc in society. Gramsci used this concept to explain the ease with which the peasantry in Southern Italy (a relatively less industrialized region) were mobilized in opposition to working class struggles in Northern Italy. The peasants belonged to a bloc headed by the Southern land owners which was in a hegemonic alliance with the capitalists of Northern Italy. The peasants subsumed their antagonism to their land-owning class because of bloc membership. While Gramsci's use of the historic bloc has much to do with class analysis, I argue that we should discard the baggage of polar classes altogether and simply work with blocs (defined regionally, ethnically, or by some specific criteria to be determined by historical investigation) as the relevant unit of analysis in Third World countries.

Communication scholars have utilized some of Gramsci's concepts. However, they have seen only the most obvious form of hegemony, the ideological role of the mass media and culture. The hegemonic role of the political/policy process itself has not been examined by communication scholars. I will illustrate the hegemonic nature of the political process first using a simple example: US telecommunication regulation with its "due process", "public interest" standard, and appeals procedures. Due process allows all parties affected by a regulatory/policy action to make formal presentations to the decision-making body. These presentations take the form of rhetorically converting statements of private interest into statements of public interest. Thus all presentations will apear to be in the public interest despite the enmity of the various parties. Once the conversions have been made, the decision-makers will allow for rebuttals, compromises, etc., but in the final analysis, will come up with their version of the public interest supported by the record. The appeals procedure ensures that the primary adjudicators allow for due process and establish a connection between their version of the public interest and the various versions presented by the parties. This is a hegemonic process that cloths particular interests in the language of universal interest. This conceptualization differs from the classic Gramscian version in that it is not possible to identify the polar classes. But it also differs from classic pluralism in that all parties are not assumed to have equal opportunities of affecting the outcome, and indeed may be systemically advantaged or disadvantaged. But the real value of Gramscian theory is seen not from this simplistic illustration, but at the level of the policy process as a whole, one level of abstraction up from proceedings before a single regulatory body.

In this larger frame, multiple agencies of the state strive to establish hegemony over each other and multiple industry players. Certain issues are placed on the agenda and others are not. Issues are framed in specific ways. The terrain of policy discourse is defined marking out certain positions as acceptable and others as extreme. Compromises are made in telecommunication policy to achieve consensus in industrial or national security policy, and vice versa. In analysis, attention must be paid not only to the policy discourse which is the primary medium of hegemony (addressed to policy actors), but also to how the policy discourse is depicted in popular discourse (i.e., media coverage addressed to various publics) and how the popular discourse (e.g., in the form of opinion surveys or letters of complaint) is fed back into the policy process. Technological and market developments such as product announcements, establishment or non-establishment of standards, predatory pricing, etc. (the working out of the hegemonic process through means other than words) must be integrated into the analysis. At this larger level, those who wish to persist with the Gramscian acceptance of the fundamental importance of the polar classes of capital and proletariat may be able to do so. I, however, see no utility in that particular bipolarity.

So far, all I have done is to conceptualize the policy as a hegemonic process and to situate specific telecommunication policy processes in relation to other policy processes. The only levels dealt with are those of industry (production-distribution-consumption) and state. In his pathbreaking work, Cox applies Gramscian theory simultaneously to three levels: production, state and interstate relations. He does not build his analysis on an abstract concept of the state, but identifies specific forms of states (the neoliberal state, the neomercantilist developmentalist state, and the protostate) based on the historic blocs that underlie them. These various forms of states mediate between domestic forces and the world economy. Cox does not explicitly dispense with the notion of capital and proletariat as polar classes and appears truer to the Gramscian model than I am on this point. However, he too takes liberties with the Gramscian model in that he suggests that hegemony and coercion at the international level is exercised by a state (the United States in the Pax Americana period) and does not specifically address the relations between transnational capital (his dominant polar class) and the US state. The organic and interpenetrated relation between the polar classes found in Gramsci is replaced by an abstract and distant relation in Cox.

Cox transcends two parallel and mutually exclusive streams of international relations theory - realist theory that recognizes states as the primary actors and focuses on relations of force or coercion, on how non-violent international relations are managed. In the same way that the dominant class within a country simultaneously engages in hegemonic and coercive control, the dominant country in the international system simultaneously extends hegemony and coercion. Its actions in the realm of force and in the realm of collaboration are related. Futhermore, Cox allows for various types of actors enjoying varying degrees of autonomy. There is interaction between state and state, state and corporation, corporation and corporation, international organization and international organization, international organization and state, and international organization and corporation.

The state is no longer a "black box," characterized at most as strong, weak or middling. It is the interlocutor between the world economy (a concept distinct from international economy) and domestic forces. States can be categorized as "neoliberal", "redistributive," etc. but these categories are situated in specific historical conditions (i.e., the liberal state and the welfare-nationalist state no longer exist), and specific state actions at the international level are determined by configurations of domestic forces within the broad parameters set by the category. Cox postulates the existence of a world economy where inter-relationships extend beyond exchange (the international economy) to production. He refers also to the internationalizing of the state, whereby specific state structures are reshaped in accordance with the overall international political structure by a combination of external pressures and realignments of internal power relations among domestic social groups.

The categories most relevant to the present discussion are those of protostate and neomercantilist developmentalist state. Cox describes protostates as forms of state power found in the Third World capable of extracting tribute but lacking the capability or incentive to reshape or direct society. A protostate is symptomatic of a deadlock between state and society since it exists as a result of society not being strong enough or coherent enough to fashion a state in its own image. The world economy has no vital stake in protostates, except in terms of preventing them from deteriorating to the point of posing threats to the world political order.

A development of state power that may overcome the impasse between state and

society is described as a neomercantilist developmentalist state (NDS). This state form is neomercantilist in that it seeks control over the national economy; it is developmentalist in that continuous growth and structural change are its objectives. The NDS seeks to improve its bargaining power vis-a-vis foreign capital without breaking from the world economy. Its actions are constrained both by external forces, which can squeeze credit, investment and trade, and by domestic forces, which can give or withhold the legitimacy the NDS needs to carry out its policies. Thus the NDS can take various forms: populist at one stage when there is enough revenue is available to pay off social groups such as urban middle classes, the armed forces, and state employees; and military-bureaucratic when such pay-offs are no longer affordable; and a civilian cartel state, defined as one that maintains the stakes of the principal contending forces in society during a period of relative truce. In the latter instance, repressive capability is replaced by greater domestic legitimacy.

Applications in Third World Telecommunication Policy. Can the concepts of protostate and NDS help explain the different approaches to scientific communication by Uganda, Sri Lanka, and Malaysia, for example? Uganda was clearly a protostate until the establishment of the Musaveni administration. During the pre-Musaveni period the scientific research system inherited from the colonial period was allowed to run to the ground. Indeed with the almost total collapse of trade and agricultural production due to war, agricultural research would not have made much sense anyway. With the advent of the NDS, efforts are now being made to promote agricultural research, particularly in export crops. As a part of that effort, scientific information has become an area of potential investment by the government as well as external agencies. Sri Lanka, being an agricultural export-dependent country, has always maintained a research capability. But its experiment with populist semi-disassociationist economic policies in the 1960s and 1970s left it with weak international telecommunication links that hindered full-scale integration with the world scientific system. Malaysia on the other hand, has been consistent in its neomercantilist policies with the result that it has both an advanced telecommunication system linked to the outside and a scientific information system (emphasizing export crops like Sri Lanka) more integrated to the world scientific system. Cox's theoretical contributions are more obvious in relation to telecommunication investment decisions. The major changes that have taken place in India's telecommunication policies in the past few years bear similarities to developments in other countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia but also exhibit some unique features. For example, India has consistently tried to establish domestic telecommunication manufacturing despite many difficulties (Brundenius & Goransson, 1985) unlike may other Third World countries. Recent telecommunication manufacturing policies that involve importation of components as well as local research and manufacturing reflect the working out of the differing interests of nationally oriented manufacturing groups and the outward oriented groups that require modern telecommunication facilities for their transactions. The creation of special operating entities for the large cities and for international telecommunication reflected the stronger outward orientation of the Indian NDS in the 1980s (Bruce, Cunard & Director, 1988). However, these moves were tempered by the need to keep other groups from becoming inflamed (i.e., hegemonic imperatives). The decisions to invest in rural communications with the RAX (rural telecommunication exchange)-a-Day campaign and disallow cellular telephony (a service that can theoretically be provided more or less independently of the public network without drawing on its resources) are classic examples of hegemonic overtures.

Other instances that demonstrate the operation of hegemony in telecommunication policy can be found in Third World (and Western) satellite policy. Almost without exception, satellites have been touted at introduction as deliverers of education, telemedicine, participatory democracy and other benefits to the poor, the rural and the powerless. This has been the case in Canada, Alaska and Australia, as well in Third World settings such as India and Indonesia. And almost without exception these systems have been used for telephony and extension of entertainment television and not for the original purposes. There have been many studies that decry these betrayals (e.g., Mody & Borrego, 1989). Yet few have turned to ask why states so widely different have acted in the same way. Are they not engaged in the expression of private interests in the language of universal interest? Is this not a necessary part of policy in hegemonic societies?

I will conclude by touching on the possible application of Gramscian theory to shed light on Third World mass communication policy. Here I draw from two dissertations (Beayeyz, 1989; Hashim, 1989). Beayeyz's study of television policy in Saudi Arabia showed that the government cared little about whether or not people watched state-run television. Evidence that the middle classes were turning away from broadcast television in large numbers to VCRs appeared not to cause any concern. Analysis of programming showed that programming of entertainment attractive to middle-class audiences was sharply decreased at the expense of religious programming, shortly after the unsuccessful attempt to take Mecca by Islamic fundamentalists in 1979. Hashim's study of the television policies of another Islamic country, Malaysia, showed an entirely different response to audience defection to VCRs. Here, defection of ethnic minorities was countered aggressively by restructuring the television industry including the setting up of a private channel, controlled by a company closely associated with the ruling political party, and the relaxation of language and content rules.

Though the outcomes were different, both instances are classic hegemonic overtures. In the Saudi case, the crucial hegemonic alliance is between the royal family and the ulama or the religious authorities. Television broadcasting in Saudi Arabia is an arena for hegemonic accommodation between these two groups rather than an audience-maximizing enterprise. This is further facilitated by the ability to soothe the dissatisfaction of the westernized middle classes by a policy of benign neglect on VCR usage. The Malaysian state, in contrast, is constrained by its general populace that expresses its will through elections and other means. The political structure of the country requires continuous efforts on the part of the dominant Malay groups to keep the ethnic minorities turned inward to Malaysia. Television, which plays a crucial role in this effort was being negated by a large proportion of the minorities tuning out of national television broadcasts. In the absence of viable coercive measures, the Malaysian state made hegemonic overtures in the form of increased responsiveness to minority tastes in entertainment while keeping control of the politically important news programming.

It must be emphasized that the above discussion is based on the author's surface observations and not on actual research. The illustrations merely buttress the theoretical points and are not intended to do any more than that. True insights will be yielded only by theoretically informed research.

Concluding Comments

Theoretical tasks must be given priority at this stage of the development of the communication policy research since the alternative is the endless description of rapidly changing

communication phenomena. Gramscian theory, as interpreted by Cox and this paper, has unique potential to meld the economic and the political and to provide a degree of determinacy while allowing for specificity. I argue that Gramscian theory is particularly appropriate for use in the communication field because it is a communication-based theory. The hegemonic processes that are at the heart of the theory are essentially communication relations between various groups that exercise economic and political power in society. Indeed, the Gramscian notion of hegemony reconceptualizes power in communication terms. Absent communication, there can be no hegemony. These nuances are yet to be fully developed, but this article illustrates the possibilites.

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